DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 750 CS 209 765

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TITLE Sex-Role Stereotyping in Writing the News: Another Look at the Influence of Reporter and Source Gender.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (69th, Norman, OK, August 3-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Females; Higher Education; Influences; Information Sources; Journalism; Males; *Media Research; *News Reporting; *News Writing; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

To determine whether gender bias and stereotypes filter into reporters' consciousness affecting what they write about women, a study replicated research conducted in 1984 at Syracuse University that found evidence of such bias and stereotypes. Subjects, 12 graduate and 149 undergraduate students enrolled in newswriting classes at the University of Oklahoma, and Louisiana State University, were given a packet of information containing a press conference transcript, a biography of a news source, and a copy of handwritten notes ostensibly taken by a reporter at the conference. The information in the packets was identical, except for the sex of the information source--which was given as male in approximately half of the packets, female in the rest. The students were told to write a news story about the conference using only the packets. Each assertion in the stories was coded as either personal or professional. The coder then decided if each assertion was masculine, feminine, or neutral. The results generally were consistent with the findings of the Syracuse study, with some divergence. While neither found a significant interaction effect between reporter's sex and source sex, the relationship between the number of feminine assertions and source sex that had been significant in the Syracuse study was not significant in the replication--nor were any of the relationships between assertions and sex found to be significant in the replication. The findings suggest that whatever gender-stereotyping did exist was perhaps due more to chance than to any pattern of ingrained, institutionalized bias. (FL)

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SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING IN WRITING THE NEWS:

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE INFLUENCE OF REPORTER AND SOURCE GENDER

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Submitted to the Committee on the Status of Women
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
For Presentation at the August 1986 Annual Convention
Norman, Oklahoma

CS 209 765

ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that the mass media portray women in traditional stereotyped roles, which raises the question of why such bias exists. There is some evidence that reporters are susceptible to the same sorts of gender-stereotypical perceptions and misperceptions about women as the general public audience for which they write the news. There also may be institutional biases, part and parcel of the conventions of the craft of journalism, that affect the retention of traditional sex-role stereotypes in news coverage. And there is an apparent contradiction between institutional or personal bias and objectivity in news coverage of women.

This study, a replication of an earlier study reported to the Committee on the Status of Women in 1984, represented an enquiry into whether bias and stereotypes filter into reporters' consciousness, affecting what they write about women, or whether reporters successfully avoid the influence of such bias.

The data gathered in a quasi-experiment using 161 student subjects as reporters indicate no blatant pattern of gender-based stereotyping. But there was evidence of at least subtle bias in the way the student reporters treated a female news source vis a vis her male counterpart.

Gaye Tuchman, in her 1978 introduction to Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, called the media's portrayal of women a "symbolic annihilation" brought about by either condemnation, trivialization or absence of women in mass media content. [1] Several studies, conducted both before and since Tuchman drew that conclusion, support her blunt summation that the mass media present a sex-role-stereotyped image of women that does not reflect reality.

The Research Problem

Researchers have found that advertising, television programming, films, textbooks, magazines and newspapers portray women in traditional stereotyped roles. Dominick and Rauch, for instance, found that women were associated with kitchen, bathroom and personal hygiene products in television commercials more often than men. [2] Tedesco, examining prime-time television programming, concluded that male characters were more likely than females to be depicted as powerful, smart, rational and stable, while females were shown to be more attractive, sociable, warm, happy or peaceful than males. [3] McNeil found that females in television programs were described in terms of their marital or parental status, and tended to be more concerned with personal than professional problems, more often than males. [4]

Benze and Declercq , studying the content of spot television advertising for political candidates, found that male candidates emphasized toughness in their ads while females stressed their compassion and warmth. [5]

Davis showed that in newspaper stories women were identified more often than men by personal information, such as attire, physical description, and marital or parental status, while men were more likely to be identified by occupation, experience and background. [6] Miller's content analysis of photographs appearing in the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times showed that men dominated the photos, and that the photos of women showed them as spouses and socialites rather than as professionals. [7]

Butler and Paisley, classifying media images of women into five ordinal consciousness levels, suggested that portrayal of women at a nonstereotypical level of equality with men "is so rare among media images of women as to be hypothetical in many details." They concluded that media portrayals of women emphasized sexiness, wifeliness or motherliness. [8]

Molotch, noting a general pattern in which women appear in newspapers as "soap-opera figures, fantasy-role players, and not as people who do things in the world," concluded that there "is no affirmative action in the content of the print news media." [9]

Explanations for Gender Bias in Reporting

Those studies reporting gender bias in newspaper coverage of women and women's issues raise the question of why such bias exists.

Pingree and Hawkins note that research on the psychology of sex roles has shown that caricature-like stereotypes of the sexes are widely accepted by both men and women, and suggest that reporters are susceptible to the same sorts of perceptions and misperceptions as the general public audience for which they write the news. [10]

There also may be institutional biases, part and parcel of the conventions of the craft of journalism, that affect the retention of traditional sex-role stereotypes in news coverage. News is not one reporter's view of an event, but a social, consensual product molded by a variety of organizational and professional considerations. Thus it might be possible that journalists internalize popular perceptions and social stereotypes into their consensual definitions of what is news, as Robinson suggests. [11] Whitlow found evidence of institutional bias in his study of newspaper gatekeepers, noting that gatekeepers -- both males and females -- were likely to assign certain characteristics, such as insecurity and concern for appearance, to women. Other gatekeepers went so far as to reject outright stories with female principals because those women did not fit their preceptions of the "proper" role of women in society. [12]

But there also is evidence of successful efforts on the part of journalists to subordinate societal or personal attitudes to a concern for objectivity. Kerrick, Anderson and Swales found that reporters were able to use information consistent with the theme of a story even if their personal opinions ran counter to the theme. [13] And, similarly, Drew found that reporters' attitudes toward a news source seemed to have little bearing on the news stories they produced. [14]

This apparent contradiction between institutional or personal bias and objectivity in news coverage of women prompted a 1984 enquiry by researchers at Syracuse University into whether bias and stereotypes filter into reporters' consciousness, affecting what they write about women, or whether reporters successfully avoid the influence of such bias. [15]

That enquiry involved giving information concerning a source, to both male and female reporters, that was identical except that the source was female for half the reporters and male for the other half. The researchers sought to examine whether reporters, working from material identical save for the gender of the source, would write stories that varied with the gender of the source.

Their conclusion: regardless of the gender of the reporter, stories about female sources contained more personal assertions -- statements about marital status, family, physical description and hobbies -- than stories about male sources. They also found that both male and female reporters included more assertions about stereotypically-feminine characteristics than about traditionally-masculine characteristics in their stories about female sources. But gender of the reporter also appeared to make some difference, as female reporters were more likely than their male counterparts to include personal assertions in their stories regardless of the gender of the source. Male reporters were more likely than their female counterparts to include masculine statements in their stories, regardless of the source's gender.

Research Hypotheses

This study sought to replicate and validate that earlier Syracuse University study. Replication in this case seemed particularly important because of the small N or sample size of reporters (30) used in the 1984 study.

Based on the findings of the earlier Syracuse study, and on the previous research literature, it was hypothesized that the replication would show that:

1. both male and female reporters would include more personal information in the stories they wrote about female sources than in the stories they wrote about males.

2. both male and female reporters would include more feminine information in the stories they wrote about female sources than in the stories they wrote about males.

3. female reporters would include more personal information in their stories than male reporters generally, regardless of the gender of the source.

4. male reporters would include more masculine information than feminine information in their stories, regardless of the gender of the source.

5. female reporters would include more feminine information than masculine information in their stories, regardless of the gender of the source.

Research Subjects and Design

The male and female reporters whose reporting and news writing were examined in this quasi-experiment were 12 graduate and 149 undergraduate students enrolled in beginning or intermediate newswriting classes during 1985 at The University of Oklahoma and Louisiana State University. Representation of the two universities was approximately equal in the subject group, with 46% of the students from The University of Oklahoma and 54% from Louisiana State. Reflecting enrollments in journalism and mass communication programs generally, one-third of the subjects (54) were males, and two-thirds (107) were female.

A 2x2 independent measure factorial design -- the same as the design used in the Syracuse study -- was used, varying both the gender of the reporters and the gender of the sources of the information the student subjects used to write their news stories.

Research Methods

The student subjects were given a packet of information containing a press conference transcript, one page of biographical information on the news source, and a photocopy of a page of handwritten reporter's notes ostensibly taken at the press conference. The materials all dealt with the appointment of a new superintendent of a public school system; the original Syracuse-prepared materials, dealing with the Syracuse public schools, were adapted to either Oklahoma or Louisiana locations to make the information "local" for the student reporters in those respective states.

Student subjects were given, at random, either a packet of information about a male superintendent, David Chandler, or about a female superintendent, Elizabeth Chandler. Eighty-three students (52%) were given the male source packet and 78 (48%) were given the female packet. All information in the packets was identical except for the gender of the superintendent/source; personal and professional information about the source was repeated in both male and female source versions, with gender references (changing "husband" to "wife," for instance) adjusted as necessary to fit a male or female.

The press conference transcript, ostensibly of a news conference held earlier to introduce a newly-appointed superintendent to the local news media, dealt primarily with Superintendent Chandler's views on issues related to education: sports, discipline, special education programs, free lunches, sex and drug education and merit pay for teachers. In all, nine topics were addressed in the transcript. The page of biographical information sketched the education, professional experience and personal characteristics (hobbies and family, for instance) of Superintendent Chandler. The page of reporter's notes provided a brief physical description of Chandler and his/her mannerisms at the news conference.

Independent and Dependent Variables

Independent variables in the study were the gender of the source, manipulated by changing the name of the news source from David Chandler to Elizabeth Chandler, and the student reporter's gender.

One dependent variable was whether a fact about the news source represented personal or professional attributes. For example, educational training, previous jobs held and positions on educational issues were considered professional attributes. Marital status, references to family, personal physical descriptions and hobby information were considered personal attributes.

A second dependent variable was whether a fact about the news source represented masculine, feminine or gender-neutral attributes. Following the Syracuse methodology, [16] certain topics, such as sports and discipline, were predetermined to be masculine. Special education, free lunches and sex education were considered feminine topics. Other topics -- merit pay for teachers and mediocrity in the school system, for instance -- were predetermined to be gender-neutral.

The dependent variables were measured through content analysis of the news stories the student subjects produced from the information packets. Assertions were the unit of analysis, with an assertion operationally defined, as it was in the Syracuse study, as a complete thought; therefore, a single sentence could contain multiple assertions. An example of how one sentence from a student subject's story was divided into individual assertions illustrates the assertion-counting method used:

"She also covered the sensitive topic of sex education [1] in public schools. Chandler believes teachers and parents should work together [2] to educate children properly [3] and to teach children responsibility [4] and respect for their bodies. [5] "

Research Procedures

The quasi-experiment was conducted during regularly-scheduled class time, by the regularly-assigned instructor, in classrooms or laboratories normally used for the respective news writing classes. Students subjects were radomly assigned to one of the two source conditions, either the male or the female Superintendent Chandler.

The instructor told the students they were going to complete a writing exercise in class to assess how well they organized information. The instructor told the students it was not uncommon for a reporter at a newspaper to be given information gathered by another journalist and to be asked to write a story using the other reporter's information.

The instructor told the student subjects that they should try to include three things in their news stories: a strong lead, a good description of the main character, and a clear idea of the substance of the news conference. The students were told to assume that all the information they'd been given was correct and that it was the only information they would have from which to write their stories. The students were given an hour and 15 minutes to complete the writing exercise.

Content Analysis of News Stories

Each assertion in a student subject's news story was marked, and coded as to whether it was a personal or professional assertion. The coder then decided whether each marked assertion was masculine, feminine or neutral. Thus, the content analysis yielded six categories of assertions: personal masculine, personal feminine, personal neutral, professional masculine, professional feminine and professional neutral.

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It should be noted that two procedures followed in this study differed from the Syracuse study, therefore making this study something less than a true replication. While the Syracuse researchers attempted to account for differences in length of stories written by the student subjects by creating a proportional intra-story ratio of masculine to feminine to neutral assertions, no such adjustment was made in the replication. It was felt that the number of "longer" stories was adequately-enough balanced by the number of "shorter" stories that the assertion counts of the subject group as a whole would cluster around the mean in a close-to-normal distribution.

Secondly, the replication added an assertion measure not made in the original Syracuse content analysis, namely a measure of the student subject's lead assertion. So the first assertion in the lead of each news story was coded into one of the six assertion categories, under the assumption that the lead assertion was an indication of what information a student subject considered most important to the newsworthiness or news value of the story. For instance, if a student subject led off a news story with a personal/feminine assertion, that was an indication that the student thought personal/feminine information about the news source was the most important information to be included in the story, regardless of the total number of personal/feminine assertions he or she might include in the entire story.

Intra-coder reliability for identifying and distinguishing between personal and professional assertions was 93.8%. For identifying and distinguishing among masculine, feminine and neutral assertions, intra-coder reliability was 91.2%. Because the principal investigator did all coding in this replication, no measure of inter-coder reliability was necessary.

Results

It had been hypothesized that both male and female reporters would include more personal assertions in news stories they wrote about the female source than in stories they wrote about the male source. The data, although not statistically significant [17] and therefore only suggestive, offer only limited support for that hypothesis because this appeared to hold only for the male reporters. As shown in Table 1, 14% of the assertions in stories written by male reporters about the female source were personal, only slightly greater than the 13% of personal assertions in the stories they wrote about the male source. Female reporters actually appeared more likely to include personal assertions in their stories about the male source (16% of all assertions were personal) than in stories about the female (13%).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The Syracuse researchers also had found no statistically significant difference in the number of personal assertions in stories wrritten about the male versus the female source, even though the literature indicates such a difference might have been expected.

It is perhaps worth noting that in the entire group of 161 news stories, the total count of personal assertions about the male source was slightly greater than the number included in stories about the female: 53.2% of all personal assertions were made in male source stories, compared to 46.8% in female source stories.

But equally worth mention is that a greater proportion of the total count of professional assertions -- 50.6% -- were made in stories written about the female source, compared to 49.4% that were included in stories about the male source.

That the total count of both personal and professional assertions would be greater in stories about the female source than in stories about the male might be explained if the stories written about the female source were generally longer than those about the male. A check of a random sample of the student subjects' stories indicated that was the case. If having more to say about one newsmaker than another is an indication that the reporter thinks one newsmaker is more important or newsworthy than another, then perhaps these student reporters judged a female school superintendent as being outside the traditional female sex-role streotype and thus more newsworthy and deserving of news coverage than a male.

As shown in Table 2, female reporters overall included almost twice as many personal assertions in their stories, regardless of whether they were writing about a male or female source, as did their male counterparts. That finding, although not statistically significant, suggests support for this study's hypothesis that females would include more personal assertions in their news stories than males, regardless of the gender of the news source. It also is consistent with the Syracuse study findings.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

A third hypothesis of this study -- that both male and female reporters would include more feminine assertions in their stories about the female source than in stories about the male -- received only limited support from the replication data. Even though the data again were not statistically significant, [18] and are therefore only meant to be suggestive, it appears that female reporters did, but male reporters did not,include more feminine assertions in their stories about the female source than in the stories they wrote about the male. As is shown in Table 3, 57% of the gender-specific assertions (either masculine or feminine) in stories written by females about a female were feminine, compared to only 52% of the gender-specific assertions in stories about a male.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

That finding contradicts the results of the Syracuse study, where the data indicated a statistically significant main effect [19] on the number of feminine assertions included in news stories, with the female source being described with more feminine assertions than the male source by both male and female reporters.

When the gender of the reporter is not considered, however, a greater number of feminine assertions were made about the female source (53.5% of all gender-specific assertions in all news stories written) than about the male source (46.5% of all gender-specific assertions).

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As shown in Table 4, female reporters overall were more than twice as likely as male reporters to include feminine assertions in their stories about the male source, and three times as likely as males to make feminine assertions about the female source. The hypothesis that females would use more feminine assertions than males in their news stories, regardless of source gender, thus receives some support from the data but the relationship was not statistically significant.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

While overall the number of masculine assertions made about the male source was slightly greater than the number made in stories about the female, it was somewhat surprising that the data indicated female reporters more likely than their male counterparts to include masculine assertions in stories about both the male and female source, as shown in Table 5. That finding, though not statistically significant, runs counter to the Syracuse study, which found that male reporters applied more masculine assertions to both male and female sources.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

No statistically significant interaction effect was found between reporter gender and source gender on any of the dependent variable measures. [20]

Discussion of Results

In evaluating the results of this replication, and in comparing these results to the findings of the earlier Syracuse study, it is necessary to remember that the reporters whose writing was examined here were students participating in a controlled quasi-experiment. The results should not be generalized to professional journalists in a "typical" newsroom environment. But to the extent that these student reporters exhibited bias in their reporting and news writing, journalism educators may be able to use this data as the basis for trying to rid students of these sex-stereotyping journalistic behaviors before they move into the field as professionals.

The results of this study generally were consistent with the findings of the earlier Syracuse study it replicated, but the points of divergence bear repeating. Neither study found a statistically significant interaction effect between gender of reporter and source gender, but the relationship between the number of feminine assertions and source gender that had been significant in the Syracuse study was not significant in the replication. In fact, none of the relationships between assertions and gender were statistically significant in the replication. This suggests that whatever sex-stereotyping did exist was perhaps more due to chance than to any pattern of ingrained, institutionalized gender bias.

Although a blatant pattern of gender-based stereotyping did not emerge, there appears to be evidence of at least subtle bias in the way the student reporters treated the female source vis a vis the male source. Even though all student reporters included more professional than personal statements in their news stories, and although most story leads began with a professional, neutral assertion, male reporters described the female source in personal terms more readily than they did the male source. Female reporters were slightly more even-handed. That is perhaps an indication that male reporters perhaps find it more difficult than their female counterparts to eliminate from their judgment and writing the traditional female stereotype of the "little woman" who is someone's wife and mother but not someone's competent boss. And that's a discouraging sign, since even with the increased number of females entering newspaper journalism, males in newsrooms still outnumber females and account for the greater share of stories the public sees in print.

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It may have been the male reporters who included more personal assertions in female source stories than in their stories about the male, but it was the female reporters who tended to write about females, more often than they did about males, in feminine terms. They were more likely than their male counterparts to include feminine assertions in their stories about the male source as well. That's also discouraging when one considers that the female source in this exercise was neither more nor less feminine, or masculine, than the male source. Their journalistic training may have taught these female student reporters that news stories about professional news sources should be written in professional and not personal terms, but apparently they haven't yet been re-socialized enough not to draw on their own socialization as females to organize and write information in other than predominantly female terms.

It's also discouraging, in an ironic sort of way, that the news stories written about the female source -- by both male and female reporters -- were longer than the stories about the male source. Even though male and female newsmakers were identical except for gender in this exercise, the student reporters appeared to feel that the female source deserved more attention as the newly-named superintendent of schools than the new male superintendent. Story length was not systematically examined in this study, and even though all student subjects had the same amount of time in which to write their stories, it is possible that varying levels of writing ability contributed to varying story lengths. But it is also possible that longer stories were written about the female source because she didn't fit the traditional, expected female gender stereotype and was therefore considered more unusual and newsworthy than the male who was just being and doing what men are "supposed" to do.

But at least this replication provided some encouragement to those concerned with replacing bias with objectivity in news coverage of women. Female reporters -- at least the student reporters in the replication who were female -- exhibit less of a tendency to rely on gender stereotypes in their reporting than male reporters. Female reporters were a bit less likely than their male counterparts to write about a female source in personal terms. And even though they used more gender-specific terms overall than male reporters as well as more feminine assertions in female source stories, they were more likely to use masculine terms than their male counterparts in writing about both male and female professionals. All this may be an indication that these women are at least beginning to kick the traces of their own sex-role socialization and are trying not to do what the female stereotype taught them they ought to do -- think (or write) like a female.

NOTES

1 Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benet, eds., Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 8.

2 Joseph R. Dominick and Gail E. Rauch, "The Image of Women in Network TV Commercials," Journal of Broadcasting, 16:259-265.

3 Nancy S. Tedesco, "Patterns in Prime Time," Journal of Communication, 24:119-124.

4 Jean C. McNeil, "Feminism, Femininity and the Television Series: A Content Analysis," Journal of Broadcasting, 19:259-271.

5 James G. Benze and Eugene R. Declercq, "Content of Television Political Spot Ads for Female Candidates," Journalism Quarterly, 62:278-283,288.

6 Junetta Davis, "Sexist Bias in Eight Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly, 59:456-460.

7 Susan H. Miller, "The Content of News Photos: Women's and Men's Roles," Journalism Quarterly, 52:70-75.

8 Matilda Butler and William Paisley, Women and the Mass Media: Sourcebook for Research and Action (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980), p. 160.

9 Harvey L. Molotch, "The News of Women and the Work of Men," in Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benet, eds., Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 185.

10 Suzanne Pingree and Robert P. Hawkins, "News Definitions and Their Effects on Women," in Laurily K. Epstein, ed., Women and the News (New York: Hastings House, 1978), pp. 123-128.

11 Gertrude Joch Robinson, "Women, Media Access and Social Control," in Laurily K. Epstein, Women and the News (New York: Hastings House, 1978), pp. 87-91.

12 S. Scott Whitlow, "How Male and Female Gatekeepers Respond to News Stories of Women," Journalism Quarterly, 54:573-579, 609.

13 J. Kerrick, T. Anderson and L. Swales, "Balance and the Writer's Attitude in News Stories and Editorials," Journalism Quarterly, 41:207-215.

14 D. G. Drew, "Reporter's Attitudes, Expected Meetings with Source and Journalistic Objectivity," Journalism Quarterly, 52:219-224, 271.

15 James Barnes, Mary Patterson, Lorrie Arden and Nam Jun Kang, "The Effect of Gender of Source and Reporter on News Coverage," unpublished paper prepared for presentation to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Committee on the Status of Women, Gainesville, Florida, August 1984.

16 The Syracuse researchers used male and female sex role stereotypes as a basis for deciding whether topics were masculine, feminine or neutral. They considered the masculine stereotype to contain attributes of toughness, concern for ordered discipline, and hardened professionalism. Under that stereotype, the press conference topic of use of drugs in the schools was considered masculine, for instance, as was the statement in the transcript that "the use of illicit drugs is intolerable. A drug transaction that happens on a school playground should be handled no differently than one that happens on a street corner." The feminine stereotype used by the Syracuse researchers contained attributes of nurturing, caring and holistic attitudes toward the individual. Under that stereotype, news conference topics such as the need for hot meal programs for needy students were considered feminine, as was the news conference statement that "You can't build a full mind on an empty stomach...As the mother/father of two children, I know proper nutrition is vital to the learning process." Topics that fit neither the masculine nor feminine stereotype were considered gender-neutral, such as a Reagan administration tuition tax credit proposal and merit pay for teachers.

17 $F(1,159) = .284$, $p = .60$

18 $F(1,159) = .01$, $p = .9110$

19 $F(3,26) = 10.03$, $p = .003$

20 For personal/professional assertions, $F(2,158) = .84$, $p = .43$. For masculine/feminine assertions, $F(2,158) = .16$, $p = .85$.

TABLE 1

Percentage of Personal and Professional Assertions
By Gender of Reporter and Source

	Male Source		Female Source	
Male reporter	Personal	13	Personal	14
	Professional	87	Professional	86
Female reporter	Personal	16	Personal	13
	Professional	84	Professional	87

TABLE 2

Percentage of Personal Assertions
By Gender of Reporter and Source

	Male Reporter	Female Reporter	Total
Male Source	30.7	69.3	53.2
Female Source	30.8	69.2	46.8

TABLE 3

Percentage of Masculine and Feminine Assertions
By Gender of Reporter and Source

	Male Source	Female Source
Male Reporter	Masculine 48 Feminine 52	Masculine 49 Feminine 51
Female Reporter	Masculine 48 Feminine 52	Masculine 43 Feminine 57

TABLE 4

Percentage of Feminine Assertions
By Gender of Reporter and Source

	Male Reporter	Female Reporter	Total
Male Source	31.7	68.3	46.5
Female Source	24.6	75.4	53.5

TABLE 5

Percentage of Masculine Assertions
By Gender of Reporter and Source

	Male Reporter	Female Reporter	Total
Male Source	32.0	68.0	50.4
Female Source	29.4	70.6	49.6